

Historical novel focuses on Norway, Kingsford

Memories rekindled in 'Fathers, Sons'

By **MARCIA LeMIRE**
For The Daily News

NORWAY — Not since Charlotte Armstrong tried to capture some of the memories of growing up in the mining town of Vulcan in her novel, "Trouble in Thor," has a native son or daughter made life in our town come to life like Dr. J.J. VanGasse in his recently released book, "Fathers, Sons."

Everyone who has read it has been praising this Norway native for rekindling memories and painting pictures of true-to-life characters who were old friends and neighbors.

VanGasse said he based the book on many stories related to him by friends, relatives and the proverbial "old-timers" who are the unofficial historians in many small towns.

The author, who earned medical and post-graduate degrees at the University of Michigan, is chairman and chief executive officer of a research corporation. He also maintains an active medical practice in Ann Arbor.

He started "Fathers, Sons," about three years ago, intending



VanGasse Family Photo

THIS PHOTOGRAPH, TAKEN during the VanGasse family's attempt to farm in Florida in the late 1910s, is part of the history included in the novel, "Fathers, Sons." The photo shows, from left: oldest son, Peter; daughters Ann (front) and Betty (back); Maria Theresa (Mary); Frank; Josie; and the author's father, Joe VanGasse.

to write a family history. The result is an exceptional novel — a heartwarming story depicting the relationship of father to son across a span of three successive generations.

The family of Franciscus and Maria VanGasse immigrated to the New World at the turn of the century. They joined a community of fellow Belgians who had settled in Norway.

The book is written in the first person, each chapter alternating between "Father" and "Son." The first "Father" is the author's grandfather, who leaves Belgium, alone, because the family land cannot support them all. As was often the case, his wife and children are unable to follow until passage money has been earned.

The grandfather is a hard worker and a loving father, but health problems make steady employment difficult. Trying to make a better life, the family moves to another Belgian community in St. Charles, Ill.

A year later, during a time of great land scandals, they head to Florida where an unsuccessful

attempt is made at growing oranges.

Returning to Dickinson County, where the rest of the story is lived out, VanGasse humorously and insightfully relates personal and historical events. Together, the family succeeds and finally prospers against a backdrop of hard work, discipline and love.

Characters come to life — many of them based on actual people — which makes the book so enjoyable.

The author's childhood was spent growing up on Cass Avenue in Kingsford until his acceptance at the University of Michigan.

"I fictionalized some elements," VanGasse said, but the book is largely based on actual events.

Experiences range from the Vulcan brickworks, early Norway businesses such as the Calcaterra Livery Stable, mining, farming, the cave-in of the original downtown Norway, the establishment of Kingsford, the Ford Motor Co., local sports, family and community traditions, and much more.

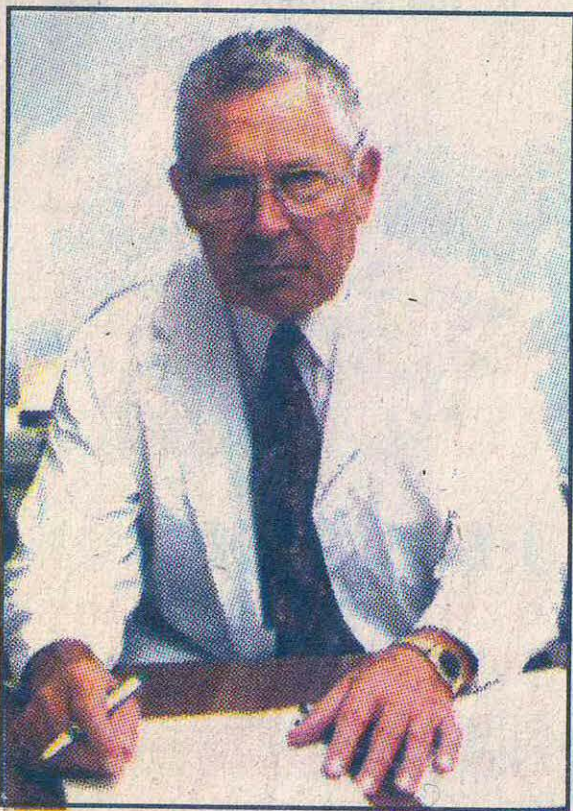
"It was great community to grow up in," VanGasse said.

Descendants of Franciscus (Frank) and Maria Theresa (Mary) VanGasse still living in the area are their third daughter, Ann Halgren of Norway; and the children of their oldest daughter, Stefanie: Ella Alfredson of Norway, August VanPembroke of Aurora, Norma Provencher of Niagara and Annie Neveau of Mary Hill Manor.

"Fathers, Sons" is published by Vantage Press Inc. of New York and is available at Northern Expressions in Norway and Book World in the Midtown Mall in Iron Mountain.

VanGasse, a graduate of Kingsford High School, is married to the former Kathryn Vergne of Kingsford.

He has also published a medical book, "What Am I Allergic To?" and has completed two more novels. The new works of fiction, one set in Southeast Asia and the other in Wisconsin, are as yet unpublished.



Vantage Press Photo

DR. JEROME VanGASSE of Ann Arbor, a Norway native, has published a novel, "Fathers, Sons," based on his family's American history.